

Clerks corner 4.2019

Parliamentary procedure

We all need rules of the house and laws of the land to keep order and the peace. Who gets the tv remote or time allowances for the internet are the most prevalent house rules. Seatbelt wear and drinking age are common American laws that strive to keep us safe. Although no one may like all the rules or laws, we agree that they are necessary.

Gatherings of people or of any deliberative assembly also need rules to assist them to be successful in their endeavor. Parliamentary procedure supplies a common body of rules that provides processes through which any organization can work out satisfactory solutions to the greatest number of questions/issues in the least amount of time. The general principle of parliamentary procedure is that the majority rules with respect to the minority. The most common set of procedural rules is “Roberts Rules” but there are others; Mason’s Manual of Legislative Assembly, Demeters Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure and Town Meeting Time.

Parliamentary procedure existed as far back as the 13th century in the English Parliament, but in America, it was not in effect until in 1876 when Robert’s Rules of Order was published by Henry Martyn Robert. This book is now in its 11th edition and successfully delves into any and every situation that can arise. Robert's Rules is approximately 700 pages long. Luckily for the majority of us, eighty percent of Robert’s Rules is only used twenty percent of the time, which leaves us with only the basics needed to smoothly run a meeting when everyone is in agreement as well as come to compromise when there is disagreement.

The most basics rules of parliamentary procedure explain the required attendance, the agenda and how decisions are made. There must be a chair, to take charge of the meeting. The Chair is responsible for maintaining order, proceeding through the agenda and allowing for equal and fair participation. Someone must take the minutes of the meeting. Lastly, there must be a certain number of members (quorum) to allow for a proper vote on any given matter.

According to parliamentary procedure, a meeting must be called to order and have a set agenda for the meeting. The agenda clearly states what items will be discussed and in what order. The actual discussion follows set rules also. A motion is made to initiate the discussion. Once seconded, members can take turns speaking their mind. Members are allowed to speak one at a time with the chair moderating to avoid anyone dominating the conversation and to include all those interested in participating. Once everyone has had an opportunity to speak and the group feels ready to make a decision, action can be taken. The vote then stands and the next article can be brought up to the group.

Of course, there are many exceptions to this basic process. Amendments can be made to the motion and votes need to be taken on those before the main motion can be decided. It can get confusing; however if the process is followed, decisions are made by the majority and appropriate action will result.

For anyone who likes systems and rules, the study of parliamentary procedure is fascinating. Membership in the National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP) allows one to take the test to become a Registered Parliamentarian. For more information on NAP, you can check their website: <https://www.parliamentarians.org/>

Dianne Kaplan Bucco was elected the Wenham Town Clerk April 11, 2014 and has achieved the designation of Certified Municipal Clerk in 2017. For more information on the clerk's office, please go to www.wenhamma.gov or follow the Wenham Town Clerk on Facebook.